Public and Private Doctrine

Essays in British History presented to Maurice Cowling

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

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First published 1993
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Public and private doctrine: essays in British history presented to
Maurice Cowling / edited by Michael Bentley.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 40013 9
1. Great Britain – History. I. Cowling, Maurice. II. Bentley,
Michael, 1948–
DA300.P8 1993
941–dc20 92-32135 CIP

ISBN 0 521 40013 9 hardback
ISBN 0 521 52217 X paperback

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Prologue: the retiring Mr Cowling

MICHAEL BENTLEY

Conversation in a crowded Cambridge common-room, *c.* 1970:
Unworldly Socialist: 'I really ought to say a couple of words to Mr Cowling.'
World-weary Liberal: 'Choose them *carefully*.'

Some say there has been a mellowing, some a re-mellowing. The present writer cannot claim to have noticed much of either. But then people react to the period that they know; and Maurice Cowling has supervised undergraduates taking the Historical Tripos in Cambridge for over forty years – long enough to expose more than one facet of a complicated personality. Nor do his mature Cambridge years comprise the full story. The early period as an undergraduate at Jesus College during and after the Second World War established one voice, his period of journalism in London during the mid-1950s quite another, the partial immersion in party politics in 1958–9 a third. Peterhouse, the Cambridge college of which Mr Cowling became a Fellow in 1963, supplied modulations to them all and lent edge to a style of cynicism and iciness that reached its coldest cut during the mid-1960s. Amplified by the cheerless message of *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* (1963), *Mill and Liberalism* (1963) and *1867* (1967), with its sardonic dedication to Harold Wilson, a variety of Shocking Remarks cast Cowling in the role of a putative Robert Lowe, reviler of all forms of niceness and custodian of the viper's fang. The later volumes treating the history of British politics, his more recent commitment to a large-scale history of 'public doctrine' in its relation to religion, and his becoming a commentator on Conservative purpose for the thinking classes, have brought shifts of tone, demeanour and reception. They have also brought a revival of interest in his views among those younger people who have become intellectually conscious since 1979. Indeed, with a single, though regal, exception, Cowling's enmities had arisen or undergone confirmation by the end of his first decade at Peterhouse. They endure today fitfully in Oxford (which has never been long on forgiveness), or as a blurred memory among middle-aged bankers who once walked the Backs barefoot with flowers in their hair,

complaining that Cowling was (to his undisguised amusement) a fascist. '*Such* a dangerous man and *so* right-wing . . .'

That Cowling helped generate a public, academic personality soaked in blood justifies our considering its character and effects. One could, as this writer will not, talk about his private personality. To do so would breach both relevance and privacy by presaging a descent into the fond anecdote which Cowling has revealed a gift for disinfecting with a spray of disdain. Besides, he has spent a lifetime refusing to do all those things that people celebrate in *Festschriften*. His eyes do not twinkle. He does not finger a pipe. He has not climbed the Matterhorn. He is not 'the fastest driver I have driven with'; he is not 'one of the fastest sailors I know'.[1] Pupils have rarely '[u]nder [his] guidance . . . felt the deep influence of those lives which were the glory of their own times . . .'[2] Undergraduates do not arrive by the carload for Sunday tea and muffins. Acquaintances do not stand about the quad waiting for a winning word or merry jest.

The public personality nevertheless draws on private inclination and helps supply an understanding to those – the greater majority of his commentators – who have never met him. For a close observer will be struck, first of all, by at least one form of retirement. Over many years, until his appointment to a Readership, Cowling normally taught about twelve hours a week (and considerably more in the early 1960s) and lectured in modern British history and political thought in the Cambridge History Faculty. In other hours he read historical material – mostly primary printed sources or letter-books in archives; and he wrote his books. He read secondary studies only by a triumph of will over conviction. He shrank from mounting a special subject. He avoided conferences and colloquia of all kinds. He almost never reviewed for major journals despite constant requests. From most of the academic *milieu* familiar to the generation of David Lodge he consciously withdrew – partly out of the suspicion that no one would say anything interesting, sometimes out of a sense that he had nothing to say himself but more often, perhaps, out of the certainty that it would all become unbearably tiresome. Even his few words of autobiography printed at the beginning of the large work on *Religion and Public Doctrine* suggest more retirement than disclosure. This seems a pity because his biography has a number of interesting phases, not to say lurches, that one would be hard put to replicate in the career of another major historian of his generation. Because Cowling has never suffered from the falsities of modesty, moreover, the reason for the retiring posture over his own history probably relates to an ambivalence about what tone to adopt in telling it. The account could be made very funny: it could take the form of a

[1] Neil McKendrick, 'J. H. Plumb: a tribute', in McKendrick (ed.), *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (1974), p. 6.

[2] R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin and R. W. Southern (eds.), *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick William Powicke* (Oxford, 1948), dedication.

protracted conspiracy for the *History Workshop Journal*; it could describe, for *Cosmopolitan*, the fusions between several incompatible styles of existence; it could show that the eighteenth century has not died; it could supply a brief for the next instalment of university reform. Any of these formulations would not depress him. But his history must not become grave, earnest or improving.

Maurice John Cowling was born into a loving and stable family in Norwood, South London, in 1926. If anything were improving about it then it would have derived from his father's determination to succeed as a patent agent through hard work and private study, making his way by studying in the evening, passing the appropriate examinations and eventually setting up on his own successfully when he was forty. His wife, a sweet person whom Cowling remembers with great affection, kept the books. When Cowling and his sister were still small, the family moved to Streatham where they lived until he was evacuated in 1939 – providentially, as events transpired, since his parents were bombed out and had to remove to Cheam. There were two schools during the Streatham period: an LCC elementary school and then, from 1937, Battersea Grammar School where Ronald Robinson – not yet 'he of the DFC and gravel voice',[3] or the collaborator he would become of J. A. Gallagher and an expert on British imperialism in Africa – was a contemporary. Come the war in 1939 the school evacuated first to Worthing on the south coast and then, in 1940, to Hertford where Cowling spent his sixth-form years, living in a number of 'billets', most of them desirable. It appears that the shifting around destroyed neither the education that his school could offer nor the boy's ability to enjoy reading. Equipped with a grasp of Arnold Toynbee Jnr and a series of juvenile responses to the Stuarts, he won a scholarship to Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1943 by writing papers that his examiner, R. J. White, would recall decades later when, *sotto voce*, he pointed out on the streets of Cambridge 'the cleverest man in this University'.

Cowling was sixteen and three-quarters. His headmaster told him, intending no compliment, that he ought to become Archbishop of Canterbury.

The war allowed able young men to go up early to the University but also placed major obstacles in their way by removing them for war service when they became eighteen. Cowling took prelims in June 1944 before his call-up in the September; his return to complete his degree would be deferred until 1948. Assigned to the Queen's Royal Regiment, meanwhile, he made the familiar round of camps, underwent infantry training and after serving in a holding battalion was sent to Bangalore as an officer-cadet in 1945. In the following year he was attached to the Kumaon regiment, among the first on the sub-continent to have a significant number of Indian officers, and for the

[3] Ronald Hyam, 'Africa and the Labour Government, 1945–51', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 16 (1988), p. 151.

next year and a half he travelled extensively – Agra, Razmak on the North-West Frontier and Assam. By the beginning of 1947 the prospect of Independence had come appreciably stronger and the army dispersed some of its personnel. Cowling found himself dispatched to Egypt as camp adjutant to British HQ there; he then served with the rank of captain in a miscellaneous unit in Libya. His demobilization came through at the end of 1947, terminating an experience which had provided opportunities as well as dislocations but had hardly suggested that the army ought to detain him further. At the beginning of 1948 he made his way back to Jesus College to confront both parts of a conflated Historical Tripos over the following eighteen months.

His Double First surprised no one though it did not emerge from an eremitic disposition. On the contrary, he had responded to the atmosphere of a rowing College after taking no interest in games at school: he held a place in the first or second boat through much of his time at Jesus. His degree provided little clue about what to do next; he certainly did not know himself. Charles Smyth, who had taught him,[4] had left to become Rector of St Margaret's, Westminster, and he had largely to find his own way. There were thoughts about the civil service and about further academic work. His experience turned on India, present and to some extent past, and what he wanted to do was to read books with as little disturbance or interference as the exigencies of life might allow – an ambition that became permanent. That he registered for a PhD still seems uncharacteristic just as his jettisoning of it feels retrospectively inevitable. But his status as a research student brought compensations, even if his subject – Government, Politics and Society in India, 1860–90 – brought few. At a moment of Crippsian gloom, with its rationing and cultural philistinism, he contrived to spend a year in India during 1950–1 reading primary material in archives relating to his thesis. And since there were virtually no archives this became a good year in which he benefited from the conversation of his Indian supervisor, Maurice Zinkin, read eclectically, met a number of journalists and lived for a while in Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay. A paper on Sir Bartle Frere, written before leaving England, the first three pages of which had assiduously been posted around Jesus College by Cowling's life-long friend and benefactor, the economic historian Charles Wilson, had smoothed the way, together with the good wishes of Hugh Lloyd Jones and Vivian Fisher, to a research fellowship which the Indian trip had deferred. On returning to England in 1951, Cowling therefore took up his offer from Jesus College and began bending his Indian experience and knowledge into a series of insights about British politics that would, in a real, direct but unforeseen way, form the basis of the three books written between 1967 and 1975. Yet his direction

[4] See Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (2 vols. and continuing, 1980–5), I, pp. 77–91.

remained as unsure as it had felt at graduation. He had begun reading Acton in 1950 or 1951 and played with the idea of writing a critical study; he read Butterfield with whom he was subsequently to enjoy a significant and personally close relationship; he worked on the Salisbury–Lytton correspondence in the Salisbury MSS, then still at Christ Church, Oxford, and formed a sense of Salisbury's intelligence and centrality in late-Victorian politics.

Like so many others then and since, he discovered that he was about to expire in 1953 with nowhere to go. None of his applications for permanent Fellowships had come off and he perforce looked elsewhere, though a *pis aller* in the form of fixed-term research fellowship at Reading promised to tide him over for a time. His mind turned meanwhile, perhaps in the wake of Indian experiences, towards trying journalism; and enthusiasm for that course increased after his vacation job with Wadsworth on the *Manchester Guardian* in 1954. Of course, entry into the higher journalism frequently turns on contacts and serendipity. For the moment, though Peter Utley[5] was trying to place him, nothing worthwhile emerged and for that reason Cowling applied for and achieved late-entry into the Foreign Office. For six months or so he worked on the Jordan desk, simply because that was where a vacancy had arisen, learning office procedures. This may have proved inadvertently helpful in promoting the journalistic option since in early 1955 *The Times* offered him a job as a foreign leader-writer. In taking it, Cowling inaugurated a three-year period which, together with an unwinnable constituency in 1959, exposed him to a world radically different from that he had known in the early years of the decade and which, despite its enjoyments, led ultimately to a *cul de sac*. He was sacked, twice. Neither case threw up any clear reason though the position on George Malcolm Thomson's *Express* had never looked permanent. But the newspapers had done at least two things: they had created an opportunity for mischief within a different social order and they had given him a platform from which to voice opinions about Suez, an event that became important in a formative sense not for itself but rather for its function in confirming all that seemed most repellent about middle opinion in the 1950s. The search for a seat, meanwhile, hardly gave grounds for optimism. So from 1958 the future looked less than bright. He moved to Cambridge in order to expand the teaching that would now be necessary in order to provide a precarious living; and that meant teaching for over forty hours a week for Jesus, Downing, Peterhouse and elsewhere. Contesting Bassetlaw at the general election in 1959 thus seemed, in every sense, light relief.

His experience of journalism and electoral politics had doubtless helped

[5] 'Peter' Utley, known to readers as T. E. Utley, was a leader-writer on *The Times* between 1948 and 1954 and later had a long connection with the *Daily Telegraph*. Dr (later Professor) John Roach had put Cowling in touch with him. For examples of Utley's journalism, see Charles Moore and Simon Heffer (eds.), *A Tory Seer: The Selected Journalism of T. E. Utley* (1989).

reinforce Cowling's resistance to political 'science'. It had assuredly deepened his bloodiness about it. The need to produce an academic book – and soon – if he were to establish himself in Cambridge with a Lectureship and Fellowship of a College must have exercised his mind once the election was over and the idea of a polemical book about the intellectual confusions of what he took to be a perilous non-discipline seemed appropriate. Charles Wilson almost rendered the effort unnecessary when he pulled out one of his rabbits in 1961 by helping to elect Cowling a Fellow of Jesus and Director of Studies in – of all things – Economics, shortly before the History Faculty appointed him to an Assistant Lectureship. There he might have remained, had not a mixture of personal friction and the attraction of Peterhouse, of which Butterfield had become Master in 1955, interfered. The Jesus period had certainly proved productive. He had completed the manuscript of *The Nature and Limits of Political Science*. By then, he had also written what became one of his best known studies, *Mill and Liberalism*, which the University Press published in 1963. None of this could have been accomplished without the goodwill and patronage of friends and admirers. Jumping off the teaching treadmill of College lectureships had naturally made it possible to think consecutively about academic work for the first time since 1954. The Faculty post also gave a filip in 1961–2 by requiring a course of lectures. That said, the two pieces of polemic published in 1963 remain a remarkable achievement, especially the book on Mill which Cowling wrote in six weeks during the summer of 1962 and which has won a readership persistent enough to warrant a new edition thirty years later. Once elected at Peterhouse, he never showed any further inclination to move. All the remaining work has been researched and written there in tandem with vacation writing at Wivenhoe and Tattingstone in the earlier years and more recently in South Wales.

In the 1960s he had no public reputation outside Cambridge, though he maintained his contact with London. Until he became literary editor of the *Spectator* for a year in 1970, only those taught by him in Peterhouse caught much flavour, and even they caught only what they were intended to catch which was not much. This distancing had something to do with the nature of undergraduate teaching as Cowling understood and practised it and something to do with the idea of rhetorical behaviour which has always functioned as one of his more primal instincts.

What undergraduates took away from a Cowling supervision in the 1960s was a sense (undoubtedly false) of how clever and critical people converse, an image of what academic life entailed that was really a vision of what life in Peterhouse entailed, a conviction, rarely contraverted where it had not been deliberately fostered, of intellectual *gaucherie* among themselves and, in the case of a first or bad essay, an acute dejection. They learned, but only by discovering what they should not be doing. They received little positive encouragement and deduced an improvement when the interruptions

became less frequent or – 'what do you *mean*?' – less deadly. They lacked guidance but only because Cowling disbelieved in the use of leading anyone anywhere: they had to find out how to think for themselves and say something intelligent in acceptable prose. If they found out, they won a certain freedom from fear and the possibility of a long talk over whisky. If they failed to find out, they were advised to consider banking. A shift of tone seems to have occurred in the second half of the 1970s which is why younger pupils speak of a mellowing personality. It may have related to the switch in emphasis away from the archival history of British politics (and the disruptive effects of constantly needing to be somewhere else) towards the more peaceful existence that primary texts allow. It may have related to Cowling's ceasing to act as sole Director of Studies in Peterhouse from 1978. So far as research students were concerned, the tone had always been congenial and relaxed. Difficulties emerged, if they did, out of Cowling's reluctance to allow people to waste years of their lives on unimportant subjects – a prejudice that cut across the grain of doctoral studies and tended to produce a catalogue of unfinished work on great themes.

All Cowling's pupils, whatever their status, discovered an after-dinner environment (for teaching in the evening became an established habit) that few of them had seen before. Some of them came to enjoy, as their confidence returned, parts of the performance. It was Michael Ratcliffe who noticed, when reviewing one of Cowling's books, that he is centrally a dramatist; and the rhetoric by which the performance was and is communicated played a crucial part in making teaching oblique, acidulated or charismatic. This helps provide a key to the way in which a public persona developed. Not unnaturally, those expecting M. Jourdain often did not notice that a play was happening, far less the nature of its plot. More telling, however, has been the degree to which sophisticated critics, chance encounters, even comparatively close colleagues, have missed the ways in which rhetoric in Cowling's thought and expression is not a tool of political analysis, though it supplies one, so much as a social art form to be deployed and enjoyed in a variety of situations. It is one of life's innocent pleasures, whether one is winding up a social bore until steam bursts from his ears or deflating one of the windbags among whom all academics live as a form of occupational hazard. This is offensive or bewildering to a victim; its perpetrator deserves his exclusion from the Samaritans, Desert Island Discs and television programmes hosted by Ms Esther Rantzen. Yet his hobby hardly amounts to threatening civilization as we know it or condoning the corporate state.

That Cowling enjoys the rhetoric in which he exhibits or conceals his opinions and delights in the responses of those who do not see what he is (often) playing at, says much about his public personality. Not everyone has his gift. Comparatively few intellectuals relish the refinements of social tension or the mysteries of rhetorical contact with a reader, or a radio

interviewer, or a high-table neighbour, an unknown correspondent, a correspondent known all too well, or one who has chosen unwisely to telephone on a bad day. There are many, among whom academics bulk large, who cannot relish anything. Cowling's relish recalls Pepys's. His savouring of the world that he has half-inherited, half-created, constitutes a major characteristic; and it is one that both explains why his tone is sometimes deemed spectacularly wounding or aggressive and why he writes about people in the first place. (He almost never writes about institutions or concepts except as shadows on the cave-wall.) His people are made attractive or interesting to their audience for the reason that they attract Cowling himself – as repositories of 'positions' to be inspected, expounded or derided; but the positions change with the needs of their positors because people behave 'situationally': a favourite word from the 1960s. This does not make them liars or crooks, though Cowling enjoys unearthing frailty. Rather, it makes them part of life's intrinsic 'complication', another 60s word and an important clue. The world has complication rather than complexity because the complex belongs to a language about structure, while complication – the ungovernable proliferation of contingency – helps the cause of dissolution and dismantling. And these form an important part of Cowling's determination to destroy universals.

Perhaps Cowling is the last true nominalist. Commentators dwell, correctly, on a methodological individualism which Watkins himself could almost have blueprinted.[6] But behind the unwillingness to consider compound notions – society, party, class, concept – as the centre of analytical attention lies a more important resistance to all universals and an unspoken belief that the world will become a more comfortable and authentic place when detailed description collapses them into their primeval chaos, leaving, presumably, only one Universal in place, the only one that matters. The destruction has assumed a number of styles over the years. In *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* it comprised a violence about *soi-disant* political science which rapidly lost its integrating capacities at Cowling's hands and emerged as an emasculated fragment once the separate individuals whose writing comprises the core of the book had suffered specific forms of castration. In *Mill and Liberalism* the procedure chopped off Mill's tentacles, instead, and prevented him from pulling together, in his most characteristic device of 'bridge-building'[7] those doctrinal elements that Cowling saw as discrete. In the books dealing with political history, it reduced the subject-matter to the depiction of named participators across tightly-confined periods, culminating in *The Impact of Hitler* where the

[6] J. W. N. Watkins' papers relating to methodological individualism are mostly collected in John O'Neill (ed.), *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism* (1973). For a critical discussion, see William Dray, 'J. W. N. Watkins and the nature of the historical individual', in his *Perspectives on History* (1980), pp. 47–66.

[7] Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1963, 1990), pp. 157–61.

periods themselves are given chapter headings that are the names of individual agents. In the two volumes published so far of *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* the programme of 'discover[ing] structures in the work of a thinker'[8] has been carried out with remorseless severity in order to obviate the need to find any 'structures' *between* thinkers. In reality the word is mildly bogus. The plain facts are that Cowling has not got a structural mind and that he does not see the world as a structural place.

So what sort of mind does he have? He claims, famously, to have a narrow one. But this is bogus, too; its rhetorical function lies in preventing people from enquiring too closely what is in it. Those who have sat beneath landslides of books in his rooms know immediately about the width of reading in European thought as much as British, the depth of chronology as much as territory. True, the judgements issuing from this width have an occasional narrowness of tone but the very judgements expose an awareness of context that the rhetoric would normally want to deny. True again, he has had since at least 1961 an image of his own period: the date 1840 appeared in his first book and has become the starting point of his *magnum opus*.[9] True, finally, his subject has always been England or, worse, notional England. Like Salisbury, in whom some of his residual images of England may originate, Cowling knows urban England in so far as London embodies it and rural England more patchily as an evacuee and itinerant or reader of novels. He does not know the north of England which he holds in affectionate contempt as the birthplace of zeal, chapels and 'principles'. On the other hand, he has always had Irish friends and recent exposure to the Welsh has seemingly proved welcome.

With these confinements noted, what he has done with his academic material hardly fits the contours of a narrow mind. He has written about methodology in political science, constructed a still-important critique of a major political theorist, composed a substantial trilogy considering the nature of British high politics across a broader period than many professional academics address in the course of working life, and begun a massive study of religion in modern England, any one of whose volumes would be seen by most fair-minded observers to constitute a major achievement in its own right and the continuation of which promises to occupy him until deep into his retirement from teaching. Each of these works conceals the mishmash of doctrine and position that all historical

[8] Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine*, I, p. xxiv.

[9] 'Erosion of the unselfconscious certainty of the truth of Christianity, which occurred to a significant degree amongst a significant part of the English intelligentsia between 1840 and 1900, was of the greatest importance.' (*The Nature and Limits of Political Science* (Cambridge, 1963)), p. 9. Cf. the opening of *Religion and Public Doctrine*: 'In England public doctrine has emerged from a national consciousness, and the intention is to write its history since 1840' (p. *xi*).

work conceals in some measure or other.[10] The nature of these doctrines we should defer to a later discussion but we can note in these preliminary remarks an essential feature of their expression.

Cowling's books are made exclusively out of what we are nowadays compelled to call discourse: they contain no data, no social-scientific constructs, no schematic overviews and in one glorious instance ('This is an academic book') no index. *Il n'existe rien hors du texte.* Indeed, Derrida has more relevance than may seem apparent. Cowling's technique has a deconstructive element that seeks to go beyond authorial intention in those he reads in order to find answers to the very different questions that he wishes to ask. He then transforms those answers into a distinctive text and the textuality has itself shifted over the past three decades and assumed an interesting consistency and shape that we can appraise. In the first two books his primary practice of arranging *seriatim* blocks of material about specific authors with a wrap-around of polemical contextualising had already appeared. But the pace of the text had little in common with that of the later books: it had long paragraphs of over-high commentary with a slightly saucy flavour which reads today as though Salisbury had taken instruction from Mansel and elecution lessons from Anthony Powell. *Mill* became more personal with a rash of the square parentheses for authorial intervention and eruption that later became so characteristic. The political books inaugurated a different kind of text. In *The Impact of Labour* the paragraphs turned chunky: indeed, friends noticed that 'paragraph' had become a new unit of conversation. By the time of *The Impact of Hitler* they had become almost tabloid and the heavily indented page remains a feature of *Religion and Doctrine* where short quotations embedded in great density throughout the text replicate one of the instruments familiar from the political volumes, though occasionally they now expand into long gobbets of A. S. Byatt dimensions. Key words have also altered, as we have seen. The 1980s word was 'illusionless': it jumps off the page continually in the *Religion* volumes. But there have been others that have deepened meaning in a poetic way and caught the attention of readers. The phrase 'broken-backed' appeared so regularly in the contributions to this collection of essays that the editor had to ask people to think of something else. This constitutes achievement; and it should not go without remark that

[10] Cowling's view of this issue seems to me, *pace* Mr Ghosh's analysis (below pp. 311–12 and n. 194) manifestly correct just as the conception of a past coming into the present in hermetically sealed units of meaning seems indefensible at any serious level. The issue requires an essay in itself but Oakeshott's exposition of the epistemological barriers between present experience and historical reconstruction in the essay *On History* (Oxford, 1983) demands more than Ghosh's dismissiveness suggests. For recent philosophical attempts at the realism implied by Ghosh, see R. F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation in History* (1978), C. Behan McCullough, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge, 1984) and Christopher Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History* (Oxford, 1986). For partially successful critiques, see Leon J. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing* (Austin, 1976) and Peter Munz, *The Shapes of Time* (Middletown, CT, 1977).

Cowling's talent for the *ben trovato* stands prominently among the appeal of his texts. His books always have, as one unsympathetic critic once said, their own personality.

Some of this flavour may derive from the mode of composition. Cowling normally composes (as Churchill used to do) at an elevated desk that allows him to stand. He writes in longhand, in ballpoint on a pad, and then dictates the draft, or what must be in part a first recension of it, into a dictaphone for his secretary to type. The revised material then comes under threat from a thick black felt-tip that obliterates parts of the page which are substituted by substantial marginal insertion. A Cowling manuscript looks quite as distinctive, therefore, as the printed page that results from it. The process also has implications for the prose. Because dictation plays a role, the text has a certain orality which comes out most obviously in the rhythms and punctuation. Cowling's sentences have tended to reduce in length from the formidable, quasi-Germanic constructions of the early books. But the sub-clauses with their bracketing commas still shape most of the expression and produce an effect in which the commas act as sleeping policemen. When he reverts to a long sentence (often at a moment of rhetorical excitement), one can read it cynically or approvingly but never *quickly*:

> The Conservative Party under Mrs Thatcher has used a radical rhetoric to give intellectual respectability to what the Conservative Party has always wanted, and in the absence of the Labour Party, has created a cadre, like the cadres of Pitt and Peel, to which, once created, not only civil servants, politicians, entrepreneurs and conventional millionaires but also dons and journalists, from Lord Blake, Sir David English and Mr Andrew Neil at one end to Lord Dacre, Sir John Plumb and Mr Kelvin Mackenzie at the other end, have found it natural or prudent to give support, even when they have not shared the austere conviction of Mr Congdon, the cheerful conviction of Mr Oliver Knox, the buccaneering conviction of Professor Norman Stone, or the rational conviction of Mr Redwood, Mr Willetts, Miss Lawlor and Mr Oliver Letwin.[11]

The point of the punctuation lies in ensuring that every word counts, that each is pronounced at the speed given to the text when it was dictated. Proliferation of names helps that process though their inclusion has always followed from ontological requirements rather than stylistic demands. But even then the pace slows as the reader can virtually hear the author pronouncing, in unrepeatable cadence, names with the sonorities of Herr Rudi Dutschke or the Rev. George Balls.

Rhetorical obliquities and technical devices of this kind guard one of the most formidable intellects to have impinged on modern historical writing since 1960. Retrospect from the vantage point of Cowling's retirement does not reveal a fixed intellectual or political position behind the ramparts so much as a mood of negativity; he denies and undermines the positions of

[11] 'The sources of the New Right: irony, geniality and malice', *Encounter*, 73 (1989), 1–13, reprinted as part of the introduction to *Mill and Liberalism* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1990).

others more obviously than he constructs a consistent alternative to them. Politically he has never deviated from a mode of Conservatism but its flavours have varied with context just as its significant presences have proved as far removed as Oakeshott and Powell. Intellectually he has moved through the phases of recession and recognition recorded in the first volume of *Religion and Public Doctrine*, but again a linear sense of progression from analyst of *Realpolitik* in the 1960s to a hawker of conscience from the mid-1970s overlooks deeper continuities.[12] The prospectus for his current project could not have been written in 1963 any more than the message of his political books had been defined by political engagement in the 1950s. That the first venture had a filial relationship with *Mill and Liberalism* and the second with unarticulated experience in India and London journalism appears no less manifest. Equally one may say that the political material always sought to evoke *Weltanschauungen* in ways superfluous to the reductive dessication of high politics that critics identified in 'the Diogenes of the Tory cynical school'[13] and out of kilter with those products of an imagined 'Peterhouse school' that occasionally offered more promising targets. When in 1969, at the height of Cowling's absorption in the archival history of British politicians, he told the present writer that he envisaged a long book about religion, he provided unintentional evidence for linkages that often escape readers of the published work. The same exercise in organicism may be achieved in other sectors of his writing. It perplexes commentators to learn, for example, that *Mill and Liberalism* owed part of its inspiration to the Suez crisis: they would feel more comfortable with an origin in the traditions and texts of classical political thought.[14] Yet Cowling displays a nineteenth-century contempt for the labelling of subject-matter and sees danger in the digging of dykes between areas of experience that historical agents treated as a common landscape – hence the inclusion of authors in *Religion and Public Doctrine* whom less original minds would have excluded as irrelevant. His politicans are not allowed to forget Salisbury's warning that people may think about other things; his thinkers finds their pleas of *sub specie aeternitatis* dismissed and are interrogated until they confess how their thought intersected with the world and became its mirror.

[12] The presentation of this shift by Ghosh (below, pp. 289–90 and n. 87), resting on an interpretation of the printed material, feels to this extent overdrawn.

[13] E. T. Stokes, 'Bureaucracy and ideology: Britain and India in the nineteenth century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 30 (1980), 136. I owe this reference to Dr Ian Harris.

[14] The point is one about the misuse of ideas in order to serve a current climate of expectation or (in the case of Mill) to draw on such a climate in order to promulgate his 'anti-Christian implications' and insert a sub-text different from the arguments apparently presented. Cowling attacked the tone of those who brought to the discussion of Suez a residue of liberal notions which the bland intellectual environment of the 1950s had made canonical, just as he later attacked Mill for uniting the conventional wisdom of the 1860s with a collection of arguments about freedom whose success, if allowed, would lead to its diminution.